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ABSTRACT

Students and the institution have benefited through the installation of a flexible approach to learning that focuses on a portfolio of articulating courses in the accounting area of the Business School at Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland. A suite of courses offers students with different abilities and resources a number of options that lead them to a certificate, diploma, degree, or professional qualification. By providing instruction at different levels and by different modes of study, students can choose their route to suit their circumstances and are given opportunities not available through traditional degree or professional courses. The articulated courses were developed in response to the needs of increasingly diversified students, such as women returning to the work force, university graduates changing fields, and students who did not go on to further studies after high school but who were qualified to do so and returned later. They were also a response to the institution's need to attract students and to prepare them for professional careers. As a first step in developing the program, the business school developed a common first year across its degrees in accounting, business studies, and commerce. Professional courses were also made more accessible while continuing to meet accrediting requirements of the accounting profession. The articulation program has proved popular with students and most graduates of the program have been able to obtain related positions within 6 months of graduation. (KC)

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Mendip Papers

A flexible approach to learning: articulating courses

J E McLachlan and
Vivienne Wood

The Staff College

MP 058

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Mendip Papers

A flexible approach to learning: articulating courses

J E McLachlan and Vivienne Wood

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Preface

This paper addresses the benefits to students and to the institution of a flexible approach to learning by focusing on a portfolio of articulating courses in the accounting area of the Business School at Napier University, Edinburgh.

By designing a suite of courses, students with different abilities and resource profiles are offered a number of options which lead them to a certificate, diploma, degree or professional qualification. By providing tuition at different levels and by different modes of study students can choose their route to suit their circumstances and are given opportunities not available via traditional degree or professional courses.

This approach benefits both the students and the institution.

The raw material

Students applying for places on courses in higher education (HE) come from very varied backgrounds – and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the profile of applicants for accounting courses at Napier University. These students may be:

- school leavers of basic ability at school leaving age, with few or no formal qualifications;
- school leavers who have studied accounting as an academic subject and who wish to build on their knowledge to obtain a professional accounting qualification;

- the talented school leavers with the appropriate certificates who choose to attend a vocationally-orientated university rather than one of the more traditional universities;

- the school leavers who have gone to university or college to study a discipline other than accounting and who have discovered, before finishing their original course, that accounting has more appeal or more earning potential than their original discipline;

- graduates in a non-accounting area who wish to turn to accounting or who find that the degree achieved leads to insufficiently challenging employment or to no employment at all;

- employees who have drifted into a low level accounting position and find that to rise significantly in the organisation, or to build protection from the threat of redundancy, an accounting qualification is needed;

- married women with decreasing family responsibilities who wish to continue their education in an area which could lead to a responsible business career; or

- single parents who require a fast route to a qualification which can meet both family needs and future economic demands.

No matter which category the student falls into, if they are applying for a place on an accounting course they are aiming for the same goal – to obtain the highest accounting qualification recognised by the accounting professional bodies and commensurate with their academic ability which will lead them to relevant employment.

In turn, the accounting profession is dependent on this wide spread of talent if private and public demands for those trained in this discipline are to be satisfied.

The institution's perspective

Given the falling demographic trend and the increasing financial pressures on educational establishments to increase their intake of students, any course offered has to be attractive to the prospective applicant. The need to market courses has never been so great, as educational establishments vie one with another to increase their fee income and to build up additional full-time equivalent students (FTEs).

Publicity has never been so widespread, and ranges from careers guidance visits to schools, institution open days and student fayres, and advertising through every aspect of the media with publications by the professional bodies and close contact with employers and overseas recruitment visits. However, the quantity and quality of the publicity will bear no long-term return if the quality of the product is found lacking.

With the changing profile of the student, institutions must embrace the concepts of wider access, flexible learning and credit accumulation and transfer if they are to remain in the forefront of the higher education arena. To remain financially secure they are dependent on ever increasing fee income, and students will continue to be attracted to any given institution only if they are confident that they will receive a high quality of education leading to a qualification within their range of ability and, in turn, to employment.

The development of articulated accounting provision

By 1985 there was an identified need for the development of a range of courses, tailored to meet the needs of students of differing abilities, the employers and the professional bodies. However, more so, there was a recognised need for a portfolio of articulating courses which would allow good students to progress quickly through the levels of accounting education.

At that time the Department of Accounting and Law at Napier University offered the following range of accounting courses:

- BA Ordinary Degree in Accounting full-time, internally examined, validated by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA);

- Higher National Diploma (HND) in Accounting
  full-time, externally examined, validated by the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC);

- Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Accounting
  full- and part-time, externally examined, validated by SCOTVEC;

- Chartered Association of Certified Accountants (ACCA)
  full-time, partially internally assessed, validated by ACCA; or part-time, externally examined, validated by ACCA;

- Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)
  part-time, externally examined, validated by CIMA.

These were, in the main, stand-alone courses, with only a few opportunities for students to transfer between them.

The lessening of control by the CNAA and SCOTVEC – leading to the institution being granted greater autonomy and control of its courses with the advent of CNAA accredited status in 1987 (McLachlan and Wood 1989) and SCOTVEC delegated authority status in 1989 – was a major factor in the development of the articulated accounting provision. Staff now had the power to restructure their courses and to amend the syllabuses to bring them more into line with the needs of the market place and to dovetail one with another.

At the same time some smaller colleges were developing HNC accounting courses with the intention of providing, in a local setting, a course which would attract local young people and thus retain them in the community for an extra year after leaving school. Without this provision the more academic students were going to the large centres of population at an age when they might experience personal problems settling down in an alien environment and coming to terms with a much more demanding and self-regulating educational experience.

Napier Business School has made arrangements with these colleges whereby it takes their good HNC students after their first year of study onto its second year HND, and in some cases, onto the second year of the BA in Accounting.

This has reciprocal benefits – the Business School receives a stream of students with a proven examination record at HNC and HND levels, and the staff of the smaller college can gain experience of a higher level of work than would otherwise be possible. This enables these colleges to attract and retain staff who would otherwise go elsewhere, and to attract local students, thus allowing them to study and mature in their home environment for a further year.

The developmental process

Student flexibility

As a first step towards increasing flexibility for students the Business School developed and introduced a common first year across its undergraduate CNAA degrees in accounting, business studies and commerce. The development of this common first year curriculum was a lengthy process and took two years from its inception in September 1985 to its introduction in September 1987 (McLachlan and Wood 1991).

The major issues addressed during the developmental period were:

- the need for syllabuses that were broad enough to allow students to sample a variety of subjects in business education, in the widest sense, yet would allow them to make an informed choice of the route to choose at the end of their first year of study;

- the need for the syllabuses to be specific enough to provide a strong foundation for the later years of each degree, regardless of the student's choice;

- the implications of the introduction of the common first year for the structure of those later years;

- the need to maintain individual course identity – mainly for marketing purposes; and

- the need to ensure that any restructuring still met the requirements of professional bodies for exemption purposes – particularly in the case of accounting students.

This last issue was of particular relevance to the BA Accounting Degree, and this need was a constraining factor on the structure and mixture of subjects that could be adopted. The majority of its graduates go into one of three of the main UK accounting bodies with the aim of becoming qualified accountants; therefore it is vital that any degree is recognised by these three bodies: the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland (ICAS), the Chartered Association of Certified Accountants (ACCA) and the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), each of which assesses accounting degrees for their relevance. It was essential that great care be taken in the re-negotiation of the internal content of the accounting degree, to ensure that the move towards a common first year, and the subsequent dilution of the accounting content, with a reduction from five hours per week to three-and-a-quarter hours per week, did not penalise those students pursuing an accounting qualification, in terms of a reduction in the levels of exemption granted by the professional bodies. The accounting bodies were at first rather hostile to the idea of a reduction in the accounting content in the first year but considerable persuasion was exercised and, given the excellent relations established with them during our years of accounting provision and the good measure of confidence built up between them and the staff and students, they finally accepted the revised structure of the BA Accounting Degree.

Following an extensive series of scrutiny and validation meetings involving academics from within and outside the institution and representatives from business and commerce, the common first year was approved for introduction in session 1987–88.

A first step had been taken in extending flexibility of provision for first year students by allowing them to delay their final choice of course by one year, thus giving them the opportunity to discover their aptitudes and dislikes and to change their course if they so wished without loss of time and without the need for bridging courses.

Those successfully completing their accounting degree could progress to the full-time ACCA course or could take employment and then return to continue their accounting education via the part-time courses leading to the ACCA and CIMA qualifications.

However, what of those students who discovered that they could not cope with a degree or those who enrolled on the HNC or HND course but had more ability than they had at first thought – what could be done for them?

Direct entry

With the change of policy adopted by SCOTVEC in 1987, and because of our institution's reputation and standing in the academic community, the institution was invited to develop 'pilot' courses under a delegated authority scheme with SCOTVEC. Whereas in the past the syllabuses had been designed by SCOTVEC, taught by our staff and examined by SCOTVEC, we now had the opportunity to update existing, and develop new, syllabuses and assessment procedures and examine our own students – with the blessing of SCOTVEC.

No time was lost in restructuring the HNC and HND accounting courses in such a way that students could not only move from one to the other but could also, if they had achieved above average performance, transfer to the BA Accounting Degree, again without loss of time and without the need for bridging courses. Extensive discussion took place with the professional bodies to ensure that maximum exemptions would be awarded to students completing their HND qualification with appropriate merits, and thus ensuring that they could progress directly to the later stages of ACCA or CIMA professional courses. For those unable to meet the standard required for transfer, agreement was reached that those obtaining the HND without merits could be given complete exemption from the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT).

The outcome was the establishment of a portfolio of articulating and interlinking courses enabling students to transfer between courses and to progress to achieve the highest level of qualifications and exemptions commensurate with their ability (see Appendix 1).

Professional courses

The professional accounting courses offered in our institution are continually being reviewed and updated with the agreement of the relevant professional bodies. ACCA courses are offered on a full-time or day release basis, and CIMA courses on a day release basis only, thus catering for the full- and part-time student alike. Recently, graduate students wishing to attend the full-time ACCA course have experienced problems in obtaining education grants as the government cuts back on its allocation of postgraduate grants. This problem has not affected those students progressing to the professional course via the HND qualification, as the grants for HND and degree/postgraduate courses have been and will be administered by different funding bodies, i.e. HNC/HND students' grants being provided by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED), and degree and postgraduate grants being administered by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). Under normal circumstances a student will be awarded an education grant once only by either funding body, therefore a graduate will have used up his 'education grant entitlement' from the SHEFC and will not be funded to take a second course even though it leads to a higher qualification. This problem is being addressed at present; meanwhile, when interviewing prospective students, staff are advising those expressing the intention of proceeding to the full-time ACCA course to do so via the HND route to ensure financial support throughout their period of study.

The value of communication

The value of effective communication in the development of this portfolio cannot of course be over-stressed. Only by talking to and listening to those involved at all levels in the accounting discipline, both academically and professionally, was it possible to identify what was required, by whom and for what purpose. Discussions involved academic staff from within and outside the institution, employers, representatives from the professional bodies, representatives from CNAA, SCOTVEC and SOED, administrative staff in the institution, and, perhaps most importantly, the students past, present and future. Their views were sought throughout the development process, both formally and informally, via informal discussion with staff; staff/student liaison committees; their elected representatives on the course boards of studies, and throughout the scrutiny and validation processes for the restructuring of the BA Accounting Degree and the HNC/HND accounting courses. Accounting courses can be successful only if they meet the needs of the students, the employers and the relevant professional bodies, and to do so, the needs of all concerned must be identified through discussion and met through persuasion and compromise.

Case studies

Figure 1 shows the progress of four students accepted onto the BA Accounting Degree with non-standard entry qualifications (McLachlan and Wood 1992).

Figure 2 shows details of four students on HND Accounting who progressed to BA Accounting.

Figure 3 shows details of three students on HND Accounting who progressed to the internally assessed ACCA course.

A successful outcome

Our portfolio of articulating accounting courses makes it possible for students of all ages and from many varied backgrounds to make the most of their potential and to achieve an accounting qualification relevant to their level of ability; from a certificate at HNC level, via HND and AAT exemption, and degree to the professional ACCA and CIMA qualifications. In addition, successful graduates can pursue other professional courses outside our institution leading to the qualifications of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland; the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting (CIPFA).

Figure 1: BA Accounting Degree students with non-standard entry qualifications

Name	*Mrs J*	*Mr J*	*Mrs C*	*Ms B*
Sex	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Female*
Age on entry	*31*	*36*	*33*	*26*
Entry qualifications	Out of date highers but not enough	Theatre lighting technician	Housewife SNC Bus. Studies	Out of date highers but not enough
BA Year 1	Average 67	Average 58	Average 47	Average 59
BA Year 2	Average 63	Average 54	Withdrew	Average 42
BA Year 3	Average 62	Average 58	–	111 poor results
	Overall average 64	Overall average 57		
Result	Degree with distinction	Degree	–	Fail. Failed resit in 1991
Comment	CA qualified	ACCA qualified	Needed to help run family business	Option to resit until 1993

Figure 2: HND Accounting students who progressed to BA Accounting

Name	*Mr A*	*Mr O*	*Mr D*	*Mr S*
Sex	*Male*	*Male*	*Male*	*Male*
Age on entry	*18*	*19*	*19*	*17*
Applied BA Accounting?	Reject	Reject	No	Reject
Other previous course?	No	HNC Accounts pass	HND Chemistry Fail	No
Results				
HND Yr 1	5 Merits	5 Merits	4 Merits	3 Merits
HND Yr 2			6 Merits	4 Merits
BA Yr 2	Average 58	Average 56		
BA Yr 3	Average 64	Average 55	Average 60	Average 62
Results	Degree with distinction	Degree	Degree with distinction	Degree with distinction

Figure 3: HND Accounting students who progressed to ACCA

Name	*Ms Y*	*Mr S*	*Mr M*
Sex	*Female*	*Male*	*Male*
Age on entry	*17*	*31*	*27*
Results			
HND Yr 1	6 Basic passes	6 Merits	5 Merits
HND Yr 2	4 Merits	4 Merits	4 Merits
ACCA Level 2 March 92	Pass	Pass	Pass

Our courses have been designed to:

- provide flexibility of entry, catering for school leavers, direct entrants from other educational establishments, mature students, employees, women returners, single parents and overseas students;
- provide flexibility in mode of study by providing full- and part-time day release and evening modes of attendance;
- formally recognise the level of performance achieved by awarding qualifications in the HNC/HND courses at standard or merit level, depending on performance, and by negotiating a package of professional exemptions commensurate with the standard achieved by each student.

Benefits

The benefits of our accounting provision are as follows:

- students recognise the worth of our provision and there are many more applicants than places on our courses each year;
- while student numbers generally are decreasing, the number of students in our Department of Accounting and Law increases each year and the institution benefits from increasing fee income;
- our students gain professional recognition for their efforts and only a very few leave the institution with no qualification at all;
- employers are confident that students recruited from our institution will make worthwhile employees, with students enjoying an excellent employment record within six months of graduating; and
- the professional bodies are confident that those students progressing to take their qualifications have been educated to the exact standards defined by them.

Therefore, the goals of our students are being met regardless of their academic profile or resource constraints, and the institution benefits not only from increasing fee income but from the reputation built up with employers, the professional bodies and the successful graduates – all of whom play their part in promoting the Business School to would be students.

Further developments

Since this paper was written there have been a number of further developments in the accounting provision in the Napier Business School. The Honours course for the BA Accounting Degree was successfully validated in the summer of 1993 and was introduced in September 1993. Also in September 1993, Napier Certificate and Diploma in Accounting courses, to replace the SCOTVEC HNC/HND accounting provision, were introduced together with an internally-assessed ACCA day release course.

The common first year – now the basis of a fourth under-graduate degree in Financial Services – has been franchised to Dumfries and Galloway College of Technology with effect from session 1993–94.

All of the above developments increase the Business School's flexible approach to accounting education providing even greater opportunity for a wide range of students to achieve their maximum potential via their chosen route of progression and via different modes of study.

Acronyms

AAT	Association of Accounting Technicians
ACCA	Chartered Association of Certified Accountants
CA	Chartered Accountant
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
CIMA	Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting
CNAA	Council for National Academic Awards
FTE	Full-time equivalent student
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
ICAS	Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SNC	Scottish National Certificate
SOED	Scottish Office Education Department

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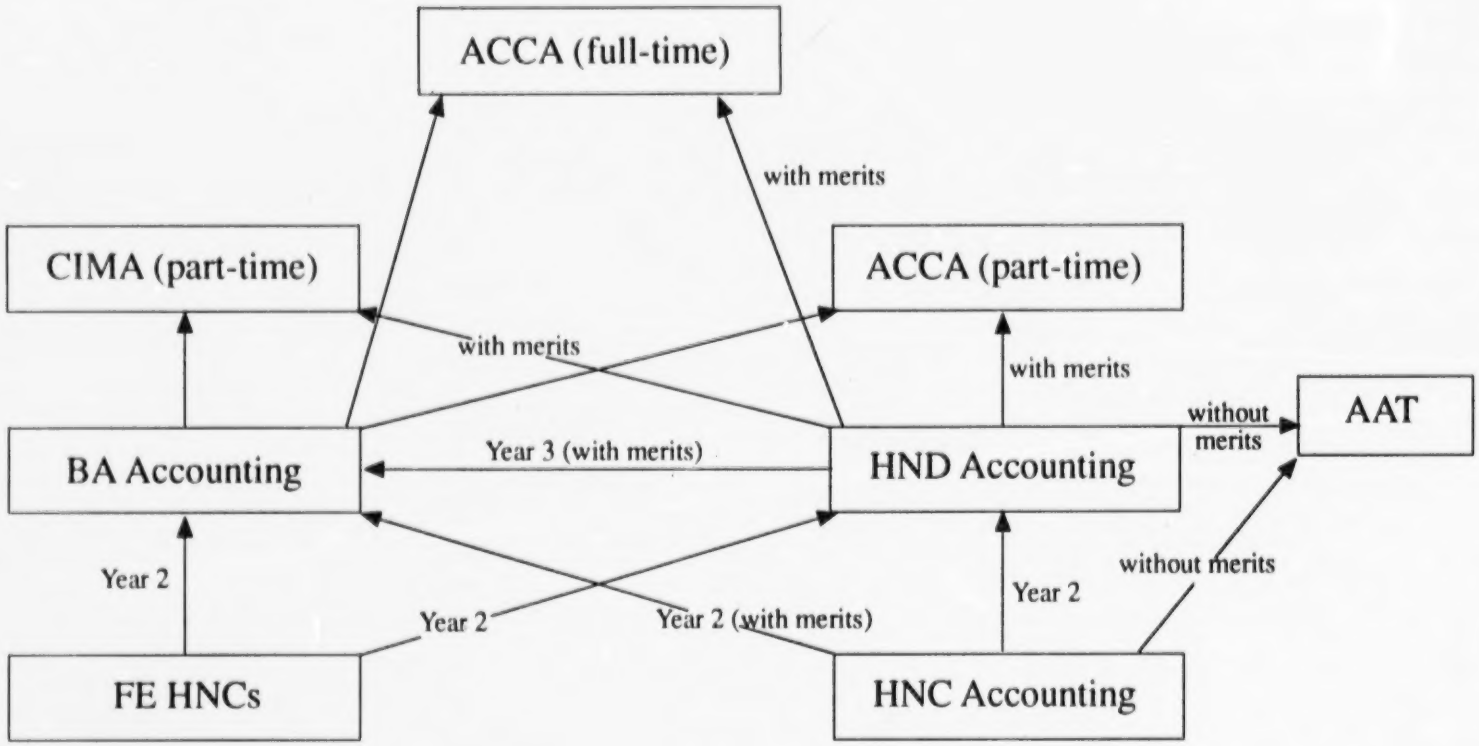
Appendix 1: Portfolio of articulating courses



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The Mendip Papers are a topical series of booklets written specially for managers in further and higher education. As managers and governors take on new responsibilities and different roles they face new challenges, whether in the areas of resource and financial management or in the pursuit of quality, the recruitment of students and the development of new personnel roles. The Mendip Papers provide advice on these issues and many more besides.

Some of the papers provide guidance on issues of the moment. Others offer analysis, providing summaries of key recent research studies or surveys. The authors are experts in their areas and offer insights into the ways in which the fields of post-school education and training are changing.

Mendip Papers provide up-to-date information on important current issues in vocational education and training, as well as summaries of research studies and surveys, along with informed and sometimes controversial perspectives on the issues. Managers need Mendip Papers to keep abreast of current developments and to deal with key problems and challenges. Staff development officers and trainers will find them invaluable as a basis for in-college management training and staff development activities.

The list of Mendip Papers is growing steadily. If you have tackled a particular piece of research or conducted a survey in the fields of further, higher or adult education, or have undertaken an innovative management initiative which would be of interest to other managers, please contact the series editor, Lynton Gray, at The Staff College with a view to publishing your work and disseminating it throughout the post-school education system.

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